Falling Through the Cracks: The Fate of Painted Palace Facades in Sixteenth-Century Italy

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Falling through the cracks: the fate of painted palace façades in sixteenth-century Italy

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I say that the architect must not only assume responsibility for the ornaments as far as the stones and marbles are concerned, but also for the painting as decoration for the walls. He must be the man who gives the orders ... If you have to decorate the façade of a building with painting, what is certain is that any opening which stimulates sky or landscapes will not be suitable. These things break up the building — a solid and corporeal form — and transform it into a transparent one, without solidity, like a building that is unfinished or ruined.

Sebastiano Serlio, Book 4, Tutte l'opere d'architettura e prospettiva (1537)

The sixteenth-century Italian palace façade was the site of considerable competition between painters and architects. This is Sebastiano Serlio’s point in the above passage, which is drawn from the only extended discussion of painted palace façades in Italian Renaissance architectural theory. For him, architects and painters are at cross-purposes. The architect demonstrates his skill by erecting a building that appears solid and stable. The painter demonstrates his skill by using perspective to perforate the built structure with fictive ‘windows’ displaying other worlds, as in Giovanni Antonio Pordenone’s façade of the Palazzo d’Anna (Fig. 7.1). Although a painter might treat the palace façade as a surface and the architecture as no more than a frame for his Albertian window, the architect had to use that same surface as a means to articulate a pre-existing solid body. Perhaps because of these conflicting aims, painted façades, and the relationship between architecture and painting in the Renaissance more generally, have received little theoretical attention.

Nonetheless, surviving remains, prints and drawings, and written records demonstrate that the practice of painting palace façades was popular and widespread in sixteenth-century Italy. In his Lives of the Artists, Giorgio Vasari describes many painted façades in various Italian cities executed by artists such as Giorgione, Baldassare Peruzzi, Pordenone, Polidoro da Caravaggio,
Perin del Vaga, Domenico Beccafumi, Paolo Veronese, Bramantino, Giuseppe Salviati, Taddeo Zuccaro, and Titian, to name only the better known and more prolific practitioners. Of the practice of painting façades in monochrome Vasari noted ‘this style is much in use nowadays for the fronts of houses and palaces in Rome and throughout Italy.’ Giovanni Battista Armenini testified to the popularity of painting in colour as well: ‘I say that among the many Italian cities, Venice, Genoa, and Pesaro, all of these are full of coloured façades, and Mantua as well.’ Among modern scholars, Jacob Burckhardt understood the importance of the genre in Italy better than most scholars today. ‘Judging from Vasari,’ he wrote ‘that which survives is a ridiculously small amount compared to what has been lost. Even after 1550 the physiognomy of many Italian cities was in great part determined by painted façades.’

Despite this evident popularity, painted palace façades have been marginal to scholarly discussions of both painting and architecture. In part this is due to the very poor survival rate of the original works of art. After
centuries of exposure to the ravages of time and weather, very few painted façades remain in a state even approximating their original appearance, which undoubtedly makes them difficult to study. Another reason is the relatively scant attention they received in Renaissance artistic theory. Serlio was the only architect to discuss them (and he did so uneasily), while later theorists of painting such as Armenini and Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo addressed the practice in often disparaging terms. Modern architectural historians as well have almost completely ignored painted façades, and even within the study of Renaissance painting such façades occupy a marginalized position. As a result, the study of painted façades has become a narrow and isolated field, largely ignored by non-specialists.

This article argues that painted façades played a vital role in sixteenth-century Italy— one that has not been captured adequately in past theoretical discussions. In order to illustrate their importance, it demonstrates how they were utilized to establish class and status distinctions and to display political alliances. I compare their social and political uses in three cities: Rome, Trent, and Venice. In Rome, in the first few decades of the sixteenth century, painted palace façades expressed the papal affiliation and status aspirations of new immigrant families. In Trent they were also used by an emergent élite, in this case to articulate their allegiances to imperial authority. In Venice, painted façades were used by emergent élites, but also commissioned by a faction of the ruling élite in order to demonstrate their adherence to old-fashioned Republican values. These three case studies reveal the vitality and popularity of this kind of decoration as well as its pictorial variety. But Renaissance art and architectural theorists were for the most part unenthusiastic about this burgeoning and diversified social practice, when they deigned to discuss it at all. Beginning with Serlio, art treatises sought to control and curtail the practice of using paint on façades in various ways and for various reasons. Thus began the long-term marginalization of this genre, which has persisted to this day.

I illustrate this argument by first establishing the importance of these façades in practice. I then consider how and why Renaissance theorists wished to control the genre and I show the profound effect their ideas have had on all subsequent treatments of painted palace façades. Finally, I conclude by probing the reasons why this art form became marginalized, and call for more attention to painted façades in the future.
'Far greater pleasure': the practice of painting palaces

The practice of painting the intonaco (plaster) of buildings with decorative patterns and motifs has a long history dating back at least to the late Gothic period, but it was not until the end of the fifteenth century, and especially in the sixteenth century, that the depiction of figures and complex narratives on façade fronts became common. While this turn from pattern-based decoration to figural narrative subjects occurred more or less simultaneously throughout Italy, the style and manner of execution varied considerably from one location to another. Sixteenth-century painted façades fall roughly into three categories: the sgraffito and grotesque designs particularly favoured in Florence; the monochrome, relief-style frescoes common in Rome; and the colourful, often illusionistic, frescoes popular in northern Italy. This practice of painting elaborate façades continued throughout the sixteenth century, but died out by the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Painted façades had three primary qualities to recommend them. First, fresco painting was less expensive than architectural or sculptural ornament in marble or stone. Second, in part because of its lesser expense, painted decoration could be completed in a more timely manner. Finally, figurative compositions rendered in paint could literally 'tell stories' about or comment on the supposed qualities of the inhabitants/patrons. Exemplars from Roman history, mythological scenes, and allegorical virtues were often depicted on façades to signal the family name, history, profession, or virtues. The house of Messer Ulise of Fano in Rome, for example, was decorated by Baldassare Peruzzi with stories from the Odyssey, while Polidoro da Caravaggio and Maturino painted the augury of the vultures at the founding of Rome on the façade of the Bonauguri family palace in Rome. According to Vasari, mythological gods were frescoed on the façade of Andrea Odoni's house in Venice in order to signify that the Odoni 'abound with their gifts' and 'to show that the same house was a friendly haven for men of talent'. An antique precedent was even constructed to legitimize the practice of depicting narrative scenes on façades. Armenini claimed that 'the façades of houses which the ancients built at a time when they conquered empires by means of virtue and arms' were decorated with reliefs as well as bronze and marble statues in the round placed in niches. These sculptures represented, most often by means of images, the exploits of those heroes who had been born of the family, just as the storie represented their victories. With the advent of figurative painting, such painted façades increasingly became an area in which families sought to distinguish themselves and articulate their identities.

Given that painted façades were quick and cheap to execute, and highly rhetorical, it is not surprising that in Rome and Trent they were
commissioned primarily by members of an emergent élite. In both these cities, patrons used the subjects depicted on their façades not only to aggrandize themselves and their families, but also to associate themselves with the higher authority (papal or imperial) to whom they owed and continued to owe their rise in prominence. In Venice, painted façades were also used by emerging middle-class patrons but, due both to a different political climate and strong existing artistic traditions, they were also favoured by traditionalist factions of the established élite.

ROME: PAINTED PALACES FOR IMMIGRANT PAPALISTS

The practice of painting façades with figurative designs reached a high point in Rome in the early sixteenth century, even though frescoes of ornamental and geometric patterns had been common on Roman palace façades since the late Middle Ages. Around the turn from fifteenth to sixteenth century artists such as Jacopo Ripanda and Baldassare Peruzzi began experimenting with antiquarian-inspired figurative designs executed in an *all'antica* style in monochrome. Peruzzi especially contributed to the rising popularity of the genre according to Vasari, but unfortunately none of his painted façades survives. An early sixteenth-century drawing of the Villa Farnesina, however, provides evidence of Peruzzi’s technique, corroborating Vasari’s report that in addition to designing the building, Peruzzi ‘with his own hand decorated the exterior with most beautiful scenes in *terretta*’ (Fig. 7.2). In the drawing, the painted ornament is indistinguishable from the sculptural ornament. The attic frieze of *putti* with garlands is sculpted in terracotta and still remains today, whereas the *piano nobile* figures painted in *terretta* have disappeared with time. This example reveals that Peruzzi used monochrome painted decoration to feign statues and reliefs applied to the surface of the walls and contained within the architectural framework. The production of this type of painted façade reached a crescendo with the works of Peruzzi’s followers Polidoro da Caravaggio and Maturino (Fig. 7.3). ‘So widespread was the fame of these masters by reason of the abundance of their work’, Vasari reported, that ‘the pictures painted by them with such beauty in public places enabled them to win extraordinary praise in their lifetime, with glory infinite and eternal through the number of their imitators after death.’ By the calculations of Alessandro Marabottini, Polidoro and Maturino alone completed at least forty façades in the city between 1520 and 1527.

The art form flourished in the new social and political environment created in Rome under the Medici popes Leo X and Clement VII. The Florentines imported more ‘democratic’ traditions to Rome, which allowed for the greater social mobility of immigrants to the city connected with the Papacy. These ‘newly-made men made rich by the Pope, but cultured and
cultivated' were the primary patrons of painted façades, which Marabottini argues were thus a form of 'bourgeois' patronage. Painted façades were particularly common in parts of Rome colonized by new, politically important and upwardly-mobile immigrants, such as the Via Giulia, Piazza Navona, Monte Cavallo, and Borgo. Many of the palaces (or perhaps houses is a better word) painted by Polidoro and Maturino are architecturally unassuming; they were only distinguished by their painted decoration, and are for the most part unremarkable today. Since painted façades were both cheaper and quicker to execute than architectural decoration in stone and marble, they were an effective means of self-advertisement for men of relatively limited means who needed to make an immediate impression in the volatile political climate of Rome, where careers depended on the longevity of papal sponsors. These newly-made men did not have time to invest in architectural monumentality and permanence; the erudition and novelty of classical figurative style and subjects served them well enough.
7.3 Drawing of a façade in the Piazza Caprettari, after Polidoro da Caravaggio 230 x 260 cm, c. 1524–7, Biblioteca Reale, Turin
But the impetus behind this form of decoration was more than just expedience. The style and iconography of the façades played an important function in signifying the papal connections and support of the palace inhabitants. This form of depicting classical subjects in monochrome was closely related to the type of decoration used in the triumphal processions so favored by the Medici popes. When Vasari described Rome as ‘rejoicing and clothing herself in beauty with their [Polidoro’s and Maturino’s] labours’ on the eve of the Sack of Rome in 1527, he was alluding to the celebratory, triumphal message the façades were meant to convey. The rapid growth of the genre in the ‘teens and ‘twenties essentially transformed the streets of Rome into a semi-permanent triumphal way.

The most common subjects depicted on façades were stories from ancient Roman history representing exemplars and their patriotic feats. Since the façades were also painted to look like Roman relief sculpture, they may have been intended to imitate ancient Roman palace façades, as Armenini later theorized. It may seem odd at first that these immigrant families would choose episodes from Roman history to represent themselves. One might more readily expect this of Roman patrician families; however, by appropriating Roman history, these immigrants adapted local history to their own needs and portrayed the papacy (rather than the local Roman aristocracy) as the rightful heir to ancient Roman authority. The painted façades expressed the triumph of the individual families they housed and, through them, the triumph of the papacy as inheritor of Empire.

In time the painted façades came to be seen as a part of the heritage of ancient Rome. In art treatises, young artists were encouraged to begin learning all’antica style by copying the painted façades of Polidoro and others. Because of the way that Polidoro combined observation of antique relief style on Roman monuments with the creation of new antique subjects, he did in a manner of speaking create ‘new antiquities’. In this way, the houses of immigrant papalists not only expressed a ‘resurrection’ of ancient authority, but also its on-going production in Papal Rome.

TRENT: PAINTED FAÇADES FOR IMPERIAL ALLIES

The sudden and intense rise in popularity of figurative painted façades in Trent in the early sixteenth century also corresponded with significant social and political changes. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, Trent became an increasingly important launching point for Emperor Maximilian’s various ambitions in Italy. In this period, the city grew considerably in political and military importance, enticing a number of merchants and bureaucrats to immigrate from surrounding areas. These immigrants cultivated ties with the Emperor, his court, and army and benefited financially and socially from the
changed political climate. They were the primary patrons of the building and decorating frenzy that followed in Maximilian’s wake. Thus, as in Rome, the art form can be associated with members of an immigrant middle class who benefited from their allegiance to an imperialist authority.

The decorations painted on Tridentine façades, like those in Rome, expressed not only the triumph of the immigrant family, but also that of the Empire by which it had profited. Evidence suggests that a number of painted palaces were decorated on the occasion of particular ceremonial entries and triumphal processions organized by the various Emperors who passed through or remained in the city over the course of the sixteenth century. In a manner similar to those in Rome, painted palace façades rendered the triumphal statements of processions a more permanent part of the urban fabric.

The manner in which the theme of triumph and the political connections between newly established immigrants and imperial authority were figured differed considerably in the two cities. A typical early example of the Tridentine type is provided by the Palazzo Geremia, commissioned probably in the first decade of the sixteenth century by the Veronese cloth merchant Giovanni Antonio Pona (called Geremia) (Fig. 7-4). The most striking difference is the use of a variety of colours as opposed to the monochrome more typical in Rome. In addition, rather than simply imitating sculpture or architectural detail applied to the surface of the building, painting is used on the Palazzo Geremia to create various levels of pictorial illusion. On the one hand, the painter (possibly of the school of Vicenzo Foppa) creates a fictive architectural framework that appears to be applied to the surface of the structure, and that is coordinated with the real architectural features of mouldings, doors, and balconies. In addition to the illusion of the architectural details, there are painted elements, such as the tapestries hanging from the balconies, which appear to billow out in front of the architectural wall. Other times, the artist creates fictive spaces receding from the ‘picture plane’ as in the painted ‘loggias’ of the third floor. Finally, the scenes on the piano nobile are depicted as though seen through the fictive pilasters and in a spatial setting unrelated to the architecture itself.

Rather than using monochrome all’antica technique to signify their connection to the Papacy, in Trent the newly-made men demonstrated and reinforced their imperial connections primarily through portraiture and heraldry. The Palazzo Geremia again provides a good example. In the fictive ‘loggias’ of the top floor, the artist has twice represented Emperor Maximilian, surrounded by his courtiers, in the act of giving audience to local supplicants. On other Tridentine façades, portrait rondels of unmistakably Hapsburg profiles or imperial insignia such as the black two-headed eagle, rather than elaborate narrative scenes with portraits, evoked the inhabitants’
ties to the Emperor. Despite differences in style and iconography, the patronage patterns and social goals of the painted façades in Rome and Trent are strikingly similar. In both cases we find an emergent élite using this genre to announce their arrival and achievement, and to publicly signal their allegiance to and alliance with an established imperial authority.

VENICE: PAINTED PALACES AND MEDIOCRRAS

It is more difficult to ascribe the rise of figurative façade painting in Venice to the patronage of any single group or class. Some patrons of these works were indeed middle-class citizens (cittadini), such as the civil servant Andrea Odoni and the flour and wine merchant Dionisio Bellavite. But others belonged to the patrician élite. This phenomenon can be explained through an examination of the history of palace façade decoration in Venice and consideration of the particular political situation in this nominally Republican oligarchy.

In fifteenth-century Venice many palaces were ornamented with painted decorative motifs, sometimes covering most of the surface of the building. An example of the type is illustrated by Vittore Carpaccio in his painting Healing of the Possessed Man (Fig. 7.5 — the house on the right edge of the painting,
7.5 Healing of the Possessed Man, Vittore Carpaccio, 1494, Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice
depicted behind the Rialto bridge). Towards the end of the century, however, Lombard masons imported to the city the practice of surfacing buildings with multicoloured marbles. The Palazzo Dario on the Grand Canal is a particularly striking example of this type (Fig. 7.6). Visiting Venice in 1495, Philippe de Commynes commented on this change of style, although he was misinformed about its timing:

the houses are very large and high and made of good stone, and the old ones are all painted; the others, built in the last hundred years [sic], all have fronts of white marble, which they bring from Istria, a hundred miles from there, and they also have large slabs of porphyry and serpentine on the front.\textsuperscript{14}

As Commynes' comment makes clear, such façades signified wealth and social standing not only through the innate preciousness of their materials, but also through the difficulty and expense required to bring the stone to an island city.

In the years after the League of Cambrai (1509), however, painted façades became common again, only now they exhibited figurative scenes mostly of allegorical subjects, sometimes based on Roman mythology, rather than decorative motifs.\textsuperscript{15} The building that most contributed to the revival and
transformation of façade painting in Venice was the Fondaco dei Tedeschi (Fig. 7.7), painted by Giorgione and Titian shortly after its reconstruction in 1508. Although there are no detailed surviving illustrations of the whole, the painting seems to have combined a fictive architectural framework with figures depicted in colour. Colour continued to be used on Venetian façades, as for example on the Palazzo d'Anna painted by Pordenone before 1535, an overall view of which is provided in a surviving drawing (Fig. 7.1). For Vasari, the use of colour on Venetian palace façades was yet another example of the Venetians' love of colour in general.

Although painted façades were produced in Venice throughout the sixteenth century, this aspect of Venetian palace design has received relatively little attention from scholars, especially architectural historians. Rather it is the introduction of central Italian classicizing architectural style that has most concerned historians of Venetian palace design. In his justly famous argument, Manfredo Tafuri associated the importation of central Italian style seen in palaces such as Jacopo Sansovino's Palazzo Cornaro
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(Fig. 7.8) and Michele Sanmichieli’s Palazzo Grimani (1559) with attempts by the wealthiest members of the patriciate to distinguish themselves within their cohort. By employing this ‘foreign’ (Roman) style these *primi* or *papalisti* families signalled their powerful connections with the Papacy, as well as their great wealth, through novel and expensive *all’antica* marble architectural decoration. 

In contradistinction to the central Italian inspired designs of the *primi* or *papalisti* families, according to Tafuri, another faction of the patriciate was

7.8  Palazzo Cornaro, Jacopo Sansovino, begun 1545, Venice
more anxious to uphold the traditional value of *mediocritas* – the idea that all members of the patriciate were in principle equal and that no one family should stand out from the rest. These patrons preferred a more modest style of architecture more closely associated with Venetian traditions. Tafuri failed to note, however, that a number of the most prominent palaces he used to illustrate the tastes of this second group of patrons were originally painted. For example, Tafuri’s central example of the style, the Palazzo Zen in the Campo dei Gesuiti (Fig. 7.9) was painted on both the canal and the campo façades by Jacopo Tintoretto and Andrea Schiavone.\(^6\) Two of his other primary examples, the Palazzo Loredano at Campo Santo Stefano and the Palazzo Gussoni at Santa Fosca, were also well known for their painted exteriors.\(^7\) The simplicity and modesty Tafuri attributed to these buildings was a product of the fact that they were designed to provide large surface areas to be decorated with painting. These examples suggest that the traditionalist faction of the Venetian patriciate may not so much have favoured a simple architecture as a painted architecture.

Painted façades may have been perceived by Venetians as less ostentatious and more traditional, and thus more in keeping with the ideal of *mediocritas*. First, in Venice painted façades could be regarded as a return to the
mediaeval tradition of painting buildings, which had been interrupted by the Lombard marble-encrusted style; they may have been associated with the time-honoured traditions of the Republic, and thus, contrasted with the foreign importation of classical-inspired architectural ornament. In this way, sixteenth-century painted façades fit Tafuri's notion of renovatio (renewal and updating of tradition). Rather than the novitas (novelty) of the Central Italian inspired designs of Sansovino and others, the new style of painting represented a renewal and updating of tradition since it employed an old medium to new effect with classical subjects and styles.

The relative inexpensiveness of painted façades compared to those covered with imported precious materials may also have made them convincing expressions of mediocritas. This is borne out in the documentation surrounding the rebuilding and decoration of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi. Official records expressly forbid the use of either marble veneer or sculptural ornament on the façade. The motivation behind this may have been to prevent the Germans from too obvious a statement of wealth (although it seems that the construction was commissioned by the Venetian State), or to limit the expense of the building. Painted façades in Venice then could be associated with a certain frugality. At the same time though they were not without magnificence, since they were thought to ornament the city to the mutual benefit and value of both their owners and public viewers, Venetians and foreigners alike. Painted buildings like the Fondaco and the Palazzo d'Anna were among the most admired and commented upon palaces in Venice.

Unfortunately, Venetians wrote little about this popular practice. The one Venetian theorist who did comment on painted façades reveals the kind of value that could be ascribed to them. In writing about the nobility of painting in his Dialogo della pittura (1557), Ludovico Dolce used painted façades as an example of the value of artistic skill over precious materials. ‘The façades of houses and palaces give far greater pleasure to the eyes of other men when painted by the hand of a master of quality than they do with incrustations of white marble and porphyry and serpentine embellished with gold.’ He sets painted façades in direct opposition to the marble-encrusted façades of the Lombard-style and commends them because they exhibit artistic skill rather than lavish materials. This precept of the value of skill over material, a cornerstone of Renaissance artistic theory, is found in Alberti’s architectural treatise as well: ‘I therefore conclude that anyone who wants to understand correctly the true and correct ornament of building must realize that its principal component and generator is not the outlay of wealth but the wealth of ingenuity.’ This line of argument was applied directly to façade decoration by Paolo Cortesi: ‘Others favour the use of concrete for building walls, preferring to face with incised stucco [sgraffito] thus rendering the house more elegant through skill than sumptuous through the abundant use of marble.’
'More delight than dignity': the theory of painted façades

According to one vein of artistic theory then, painted façades could be valued above architectural ornament since they demonstrated the value of skill over material. This was not, however, the way in which most art and architectural theory of the sixteenth century approached the distinction between painted and architectural ornament on palace façades. For the most part, theoreticians did not comment on painted façades. In fact, painting on architecture is a good example of how theory and practice in Renaissance architecture fail to correspond. Architectural theorists, with the exception of Serlio, may have avoided the subject because it was not treated in their ur-model, Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture*; as a subject of theory it had no precedent, and as a practice it had no classical pedigree. Painted façades were more readily discussed in relation to the art of painting. Vasari, for example, described specific painted façades in glowing terms within individual artists' biographies, and devoted attention to the techniques involved in his preface, but he did not expound a particular theoretical point of view. This was left to the late sixteenth-century theorists, Armenini and Lomazzo, both of whom devoted chapters in their treatises on painting to the subject of painted façades.

Serlio may have been the only architectural theorist to discuss painted façades, but he was not completely at ease with the practice. He addressed the subject several times in his multi-volume treatise and even designed and illustrated façades to incorporate such ornamentation, but at the same time he was concerned to control and curtail the use of paint on architecture, as my introductory quotation suggests. Although Serlio's ideas do not seem to have had much direct influence on the actual practice of painting palaces, they do seem to have led to further condemnation of the practice by late sixteenth-century writers on painting. Ultimately the preponderance of theoretical writing, at least partially critical of the use of paint on architecture, probably contributed to the marked decrease in the popularity of the genre in the seventeenth century.

When he did write of painted façades, Serlio spoke from a highly informed point of view. He was initially trained as a painter, and much of his later artistic production combined architecture and painting or drawing. The same was also true of his primary mentor, Peruzzi, whose ideas are thought to lie behind much of Serlio's treatise. As a close follower of Peruzzi living in Rome in the heyday of painted façade production, Serlio would have been very familiar with Roman decorative techniques. Then in 1527 he moved to Venice, where he began writing his architectural treatise. During this period he had ample opportunity to study the many famous painted façades in that city as well. Serlio's extensive knowledge of and exposure to
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painted façades in both cities suggests that his theoretical statements about the art form were a response to the various practices he observed.

His response was to favour the monochrome style made famous by his teacher Peruzzi in Rome. One even suspects that Serlio developed his defence of the Roman practice in direct opposition to the coloured façades he saw in Venice, perhaps particularly egged on by the innovations of Pordenone who probably finished the Palazzo d’Anna façade two years before Serlio’s book went to press (1537). In any case, Serlio’s opinions on painted façades were highly consistent with the practices and style of Roman painted façades executed by Peruzzi, Polidoro, and their followers. In the treatise, Serlio specifically commended the work of Peruzzi, Polidoro and Maturino, and the Dosso brothers, who decorated the façades of the Ducal palace in Ferrara ‘only in monochrome’. He continued ‘I will not expand further upon the many other Italian painters of judgement who in such place have never used any colour other than monochrome so as not to break up the order of the architecture.’ Conspicuously missing from his account were the many famous Venetian practitioners of the genre who used colour, such as Giorgione, Titian, and Pordenone.

While not in principle opposed to the use of paint on palace façades, Serlio wished to control its application and keep it always subservient to the structural articulation of the building. Of one of his own façades designed to accommodate painted decoration, Serlio commented ‘the spaces between the windows, which are left blank, are reserved for the wall paintings, at the discretion of the architect and the wishes of the owner of the house’ (Fig. 7.10). In his design he carefully outlined the areas designated for painting, in effect creating little fields for painting that resembled canvases or panels attached to the surface of the building. His remark that the decoration should be executed ‘at the discretion of the architect and the wishes of the owner’ clearly assigns the painter a subservient role and reveals Serlio’s general anxiety that painters might usurp the field of the palace façade which, in his opinion, was more properly the province of the architect: ‘he must be the man who gives the orders.’

The Roman practitioners of the genre properly subordinated painting by treating it as a means for artificially imitating built form according to Serlio, enhancing rather than dissolving structure. His remarks on another of his own designs further reveal the position he assigned painting. ‘If the ornaments of houses are not to be made of marble or other stones, because of the expense, they can often be easily substituted by painting, skillfully imitating the real.’ Painting was appropriate as a substitute for ‘real’ decoration, when necessary. In this light the use of chiaroscuro on Roman façades to imitate sculpture received high praise. ‘If ... you are to decorate a façade with painting, and do it with judgement, you could simulate marble
7.10 Design for a palace façade, after Sebastiano Serlio, in Book 4, Tutte l'opere d'architettura et prospettiva, before 1537
or some other stone, "carving" whatever you wanted into it. You could also simulate niches containing bronze figures in high relief and even more istoriette, also simulating bronze, because making objects in this way will keep the work solid and worthy of praise by those who can tell real from false. These fictive stone 'carvings' appeared to be attached to the surface of the built structure, rather than perforating that structure with views of sky or landscape which in Serlio's words 'break up the building – a solid and corporeal form – and transform it into a transparent one, without solidity, like a building that is unfinished or ruined'.

Serlio's somewhat hyperbolic concerns bear a certain resemblance to contemporary condemnations of Gothic architecture. Both evince an almost fanatical concern about instability and impermanence. In the words of Vasari:

On all the façades [of Gothic buildings] ... they built a malediction of little niches one above the other, with no end of pinnacles and points and leaves, so that, not to speak of the whole erection seeming insecure, it appears impossible that the parts should not topple over at any moment. Indeed they have more the appearance of being made of paper than stone and marble ... May God protect every country from such ideas and style of buildings! They are such deformities.

Like Gothic architecture, painted architecture could be construed as a form of excessive ornamentation for its own sake, with no relation to underlying structure, which thus created 'ruins' or 'deformities'. Vasari's comment that Gothic architecture looks to be made of paper rather than stone, suggests the degree to which ornamentation threatened to reduce three dimensions to two. Serlio was similarly concerned that painting would transform built structure into illusionistic surface.

In addition to his concerns about the improper use of perspective illusionism on painted façades, Serlio was also cautious about the application of colour.

If, nevertheless, the patron of the work or the painter wants to take pleasure in the charm of colours, in order not to break up or ruin the work (as I said above), he could simulate pieces of material attached to the wall, as if they were furnishings, and anything desired could be painted on them. Because in doing so he will not disturb the order and will simulate reality, preserving decorum.

Once again, the paint can only be used to simulate objects 'attached' to the surface – thus not violating the integrity of three-dimensional form. Serlio was also very clear that the architect would never be the one to prefer the 'charm of colours'. He would only resort to the use of colour if forced to do so by either the patron or the painter. For Serlio, as in much Central Italian art theory, colour was the feminized 'other', providing only the easy pleasure of 'charm'. Whereas Dolce construed painting on building as a demonstration of the value of skill over material, Serlio suggested that painting in colour with its easy 'charms' was instead on the material side of the equation.
The growing gap between theory and practice

Serlio’s treatise does not appear to have done much to slow the production of painted façades in monochrome or colour, but it did encode a way of thinking about the genre that had long-term consequences. The fact that both Lomazzo and Armenini devoted entire chapters of their treatises on painting to the subject indicates that the practice was still alive and well in the late sixteenth century. Armenini’s treatise, *The Precepts of the Art of Painting* (1587) in particular evolved from Serlio’s ideas. Although one might expect that the writer of a treatise on painting would unequivocally champion painted façades, as Dolce had, in fact Armenini followed Serlio in his support of the Roman practice of chiaroscuro painting and his condemnation of the coloured, perspective style more common in northern Italy.

Armenini allowed for painting as long as it imitated, i.e. was merely a substitute for, actual material ornament. Armenini legitimized chiaroscuro façades because he saw them as copies in another medium of ancient Roman palace façades. He envisioned the ancient Roman house as a kind of inhabitable triumphal arch. Describing painted façades by Peruzzi, Polidoro, and Maturino in Rome, he commented:

I do not believe that at any time while the greatness of Rome lasted had there ever been any façades done in relief with so much skill ... It is certain that if these façades had been indeed as real as represented, no one would ever care to see better objects.

He valued the ability of this type of painting to reproduce the ‘real’ decoration of Roman palaces which no longer survived. The power of painting to create imaginary worlds, however, was more problematic.

While Serlio expressed his unease with coloured façades primarily by ignoring them, with Armenini the condemnation of this style became direct and explicit, and was associated in particular with notions of class.

After the deaths of Baldassare [Peruzzi] and Polidoro, artists have become so awkward that this admirable way of painting has almost been lost entirely. It has become the custom again to paint the façades with storie with figures and other subjects in colour in the same manner as inside the rooms and palaces of lords. This practice is condemned as vulgar and improper by the knowledgeable.

The use of colour under any conditions for Armenini was ‘vulgar’ and lacking in judgement, and he considered it a return to mediaeval (i.e. un-classical) technique: ‘it has become the custom again’. It was precisely this continuity with mediaeval practice, however, that may have made coloured painted façades particularly attractive to certain Venetian patrons.

By the late sixteenth century a strong rift had grown between the theory and practice of painting façades. Although Armenini condemned coloured façades as ‘vulgar and improper’ and elsewhere referred to them as
"smearings" (imbrattamenti), he acknowledged their popularity and found himself forced to discuss them. 'But so that you may understand how we are influenced by custom, I believe I should give you some distinguished examples, since there has never been a lack of greedy people ready to serve patrons for pay. (He maintained that coloured facades were a way that painters deceived their patrons and preyed on their weaknesses – see below.) Custom contradicts theory – a clear warning to historians that we should be wary of too closely connecting the two. Armenini went on to begrudgingly mention examples by Giorgione and Pordenone, but concluded that 'there are many other open places which could be cited as examples of this topic, but because they are more or less known, we shall omit them as well as all those things that are second rate, for they are too far removed from us and too base."

The comment that coloured facades were 'second-rate' (comune a dozzinali) implies that those patrons who prefer them should be similarly construed. Armenini warned patrons that they should only hire the best painters to decorate their facade, or 'where they hope to secure honour and comfort, they meet only discomfort, regret, and endless condemnation. Worse is the fact that, to reach the height of folly, they have their buildings painted with smearings of second-rate painters whom they beg to use fine colours.'

He cautioned that in their desire to make an impression, patrons without proper sense would be more interested in pretty colours than in good painting, and their attempts to make themselves look good would backfire. Here again, coloured painting on facades was equated with the easy pleasures of material, rather than with the rigours of skill.

While Serlio's and Armenini's arguments together point to an increasingly theoretical condemnation of certain kinds of facade frescoes, it may have been another vein of criticism that dealt the fatal blow to the practice. This argument was not that painted facades threatened the perceived stability of the architecture, nor that they followed mediaeval rather than classical models, but rather that they degraded the art of painting itself. Lomazzo was the first theorist to propose this idea in his treatise, Trattato dell'arte della Pittura (1584), where he also invoked the authority of the ancients.

Because painting in streets by necessity had to be on facades, this art was considered of little nobility by the ancients, so that some of them left writing indicating that when the art of fresco was introduced, the nobility and dignity of painting was thrown to the ground; so that painting was no longer held in the reverence that it was before when it was done only on panel."

This idea that facade painting was a lowly form of painting appears again in the seventeenth century in Carlo Ridolfi's Maraviglie dell'arte (1648). Describing how the painter Andrea Schiavone befriended muratori (masons) in hopes they would hire him to decorate facades, Ridolfi commented:
And Art was reduced to such a state, that the painter used to be given the same recompense, or little more, than those who carry disgusting things, as if there was no difference between painting and whitewashing houses: this type of painting is no longer practised in Venice in order to avoid the destruction of the frescoes by ocean water seeping into the lime. And so instead the architects began to encrust the houses in marble in the manner of fortresses.

By this time, the façade was no longer even a desirable field for the painter. One almost notes a hint of sadness in Ridolfi’s comments about the demise of the art form and the return to the ‘encrustations’ that Dolce had earlier condemned.

Once codified in Italian theory, the negative attitude towards painted façades, particularly those in colour, was imported abroad. The Englishman Henry Wotton, seeking to propagate Italian theory in seventeenth-century England, summed up the fate of the painted façade in his 1624 treatise The Elements of Architecture.

Touching Picture there doth occurre a very pertinent doubt, which hath beene passed over too slightly, not onely by some Men, but by some Nations; namely, whether this Ornament can wel become the Outside of houses, wherein the Germans have made so little scruple, that their best Townes are the most painted ... It is true, that a Story well set out with a good Hand, will every where take a ludicrous eye: But yet withal it is as true, that various colours on the Out-walles of Buildings, have alwayes in them more Delight then Dignity.

By associating the practice in particular with the Germans, Wotton suggested again the underlying affinities of painted architecture with gothic, i.e., non-classical style. The fate of painted façades was to be relegated to the decorative, the easy pleasure, and the feminine in the theory of architecture. This position, however, evolved over the course of the sixteenth century, and we should be wary of letting the theorists’ words cloud our view of actual practice.

Conclusion: how theory has obscured the importance of painted façades

An examination of the theoretical writing on painted palace façades reveals a very different picture of this artistic phenomenon than does an investigation into its actual practice. While the theory portrays the image of a dying art, the practice reveals the genre’s tenacity and longevity. My examination of painted façades in Rome, Trent, and Venice has shown that they played an important role in articulating and negotiating social status in the public streets of at least these three Renaissance cities.

What was it about the ambitions of painted façades that led them to be controlled, condemned, and finally obscured through theoretical writing? One reason might be the increasing professionalization of the practice of
architecture. Serlio’s manual of architectural design was part of this movement towards greater professionalism. Serlio sought to identify what was unique about architecture and to separate its goals from those of painting specifically. Although his treatise was intended to distinguish the two art forms, as we have seen, in practice they were still far from separate. As the theoretical attempt to dissect the two types of art progressed, this ultimately reflected back on practice. In time, not only architects saw this ‘hybrid’ form as problematic; painters too began to suspect it, and the ephemeral art of painting architecture was believed to disadvantage both types of artistic practitioner.

Wider social and political factors may also have been at play. Renaissance architectural theory reiterated to the point of obsession the notion that palaces ought to accurately reflect the social stations of their owners. Suggested by Vitruvius, the concept was significantly and increasingly embellished in successive Renaissance treatises on architecture. Serlio applied the theory to façade decoration in particular, recommending that different orders and ornamental features be applied ‘according to the rank and professions’ of the owners. Painted façades which were rhetorically ambitious, and often, as we have seen, commissioned by emergent elites, had to be incorporated into this schema.

But painted façades did not fit neatly. The concern found in both Serlio’s and Armenini’s writings that painting be used only to ‘imitate the real’ reveals a certain spectre of ‘falseness’ in painted façades. Armenini addressed this issue directly when he admired the ability of painting to cover defects:

In the case of defective palaces where no alterations can correct their faults, painters can at least hide the aforementioned defects because they can deceive the eyes of the beholder through their painting and perspectives which they execute with good judgement. The greatness of this accomplishment has been seen in things which are in themselves miserable and vile, but have been made to appear magnificent, graceful, and honourable through the painter’s art. Painting, unlike architecture, was by its nature a ‘deceitful’ art, and while this could occasionally have advantages, it also had dangers that had to be controlled. If painting remained only a poor ‘substitute’ for ‘real’ ornament, then it did not threaten established architectural and social order. If, however, the painting took on a ‘life’ of its own, especially with colour, it threatened to overshadow architecture, the more expensive and permanent of the two media. If painting on façades became an end unto itself, then distinctions based on wealth and the ability to procure and buy the stone or marble could be less clearly projected and reified. The ‘deceit’ of painting was not only artistic, but social – by using painted façades, less wealthy and less established patrons could claim ‘artificially’ high positions of social status for themselves.
In practice, painted façades were meant to obscure or transcend barriers of wealth and class by permitting affordable decoration that made claims to high degrees of learning and culture. Theoretical treatises evolved in response to this practice and sought to prohibit, or at least curtail, such claims by reinscribing painted façades under architectonic ornament in a hierarchy based on wealth and power. The struggle on the site of the Renaissance palace façade between architects and painters was not just a professional matter, it was also a political and social one. Here we find different factions in the élite seeking to assert their notions of proper consumption and display. While in different cities this struggle may have involved different social groups and pictorial practices, in all cases the forms of architectural classicism ('encrusted ... in marble in the manner of fortresses') eventually won out over the 'pleasure' and 'delight' of painted decoration.

The ultimate triumph of a notion of classicism based on architectonic solidity and restrained ornament has obscured the struggle that preceded it. Architectural historians have been so influenced by the winning theoretical viewpoint that for the most part they have ignored art forms that did not directly contribute to the teleological development of this type of classicism. For example, although Tafuri recognized a counter strain in Venetian architecture, he was unable to conceptualize it except in relationship to a Central Italian norm focused on tectonic structure. He did not see the painting on the façade as part of the architecture, but as extraneous ornament, lost by time and unworthy of discussion as part of the development of 'architecture'. Serlio's treatise may have contributed to the theoretical distinction between the two types of art, painting and architecture, but in Renaissance practice the two were still intimately intertwined.

For this reason, the subject of painted façades needs to be more fully integrated with the study of Renaissance palace architecture and urbanism in general. A painted façade was an important option for a palace front that many Renaissance patrons preferred to a more permanent form of classicism expressed through marble and the orders. In early modern Italy, the palace façade, as interface between society and the individual or family, was a site for self-fashioning and the construction of family identity. As such, façades transformed the streets and piazzas into arenas for the public expression of conflicting social and political ideologies. By treating the Renaissance palace façade as a site, rather than as a medium (painting or architecture), a greater sense of the complexity of both artistic forms and social competitions emerges.
Frequently cited sources


Notes

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7. For example in his three-volume study, *Der römische Palastbau der Hochrenaissance*, Tubingen: E. Wasmuth, 1973, C. L. Frommel only incidentally mentions painted façades, which were at the height of their popularity during the period covered by Frommel’s book. Social historians of architecture are also guilty of this oversight. In his discussion of palace architecture in *Venice and the Renaissance*, Manfredo Tafuri ignores the practice of painting architecture (see discussion below) and Charles Burroughs, ‘Building’s lace’, p. 20, dismisses the practice in one sentence in a study on the ornamentation of Roman palace façades in the sixteenth century: Painted decoration is often disregarded as if it were of no consequence, as when John Onians sees the ‘simple square piers with plain capitals’ of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi as evidence that Venetians preferred plain, more modest buildings for commercial activities, while failing to mention that the building was lavishly painted by Giorgione and Titian. *The Builders of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 323.


1. Ibid., p. 887. ‘Per farne, come accennato, abondantissima quella casa degli Udoni ... per mostrare ... che fusse amica et un albergo di virtuosi.’ Vasari, Vite, text vol. 4, p. 450.


13. Marabottini, Polidoro, vol. 1, p. 104. However, Marabottini notes that little is known about the early development of this style.


16. Sometimes these figural scenes may have been adjusted according to the viewpoint. Vasari, Lives, vol. 1, pp. 811-12, speaks of façades by Peruzzi as painted ‘with marvellous perspectives’ and scenes ‘foreshortened with a view to being seen from below’. But they are always described as being in monochrome, hence presumably imitating statues and reliefs.

17. Ibid., p. 895. ‘E fu tanto nota per tutto la fama di questi maestri per l’abondanza del lavoro, che furono cagione le pubbliche pitture da loro con tanta bellezza lavorate che’ meritarono lode grandissima in vita, et infinita eterna per l’imitazione l’hanno avuta dopo la morte.’ Vasari, Vite, text vol. 4, p. 462.


19. Ibid., pp. 105-6.

20. Ibid., p. 31.

21. Ibid.; also see Burroughs, ‘Building’s face’, p. 20.

22. For example, compare the modern photograph of the Palazzo Milesi to the print representing its original decoration in Marabottini, Polidoro, vol. 2, plates CXLVI-CXLVII.

23. Ibid., p. 105. Vasari, Technique, p. 249, discusses the two practices (façade painting and triumphal decorations) in conjunction with one another.


26. See note 12.

29. See Bellarba, ‘Figure di nobiltà’.
32. See Bellarba, ‘Figure di nobiltà’, p. 54. This is not to say that the use of heraldry and portraiture was unknown in Rome. Similarly, subjects from ancient Roman history were often depicted on façades in Trent undoubtedly alluding to the Holy Roman Empire’s special connection to the ancient Roman Empire. However, overall the use of heraldry and portraiture is more striking in Trent and the use of historical narrative more common in Rome.
35. For the subjects depicted on Venetian façades see Foscari, Affreschi, and McTavish, ‘Roman subject-matter’.
36. The literature on the façade is extensive. Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment is in Terisio Pignatiti and Rodolfo Pallucchini, eds, Giorgione a Venezia, Milan: Electa, 1978, pp. 117-42.
38. Tafuri, Venice and the Renaissance, pp. 7-8.
39. Ibid., p. 3. On the frescoes see Foscari, Affreschi, pp. 67, 69-70.
41. For Tafuri’s discussion of venezian and scuola, see Venice and the Renaissance, pp. 2, 10, 13.
43. According to Vasari the Fondaco was ‘celebrated and famous in Venice, no less for what [Giorgione] painted therein than through its convenience for commerce and its utility to the commonwealth’, and the façade of the Palazzo d’Anna ‘pleased the whole city of Venice beyond measure, and Pordenone was therefore extolled more highly than any other man who had ever worked in the city up to that time’ (Lives, vol. 1, pp. 643 and 876). Armenini, Titian Precepts, pp. 272-3, reported that the Fondaco ‘is much praised for its fine colouration’ and the Palazzo d’Anna ‘is the cause of great wonder for the people’.
47. To my knowledge the subject is not discussed in any architectural treatise besides Serlio’s. It was mentioned in passing by Paolo Cortesi who wisely noted that ‘exterior ornaments change according to the fashion of the times and the progress of learning’, ibid., p. 87. Filarete suggested subjects to adorn exterior walls of the prince’s palace, but he mentioned only the ‘side elevation’ and courtyard walls. See Filarete’s Tretise on Architecture, translated by John R. Spencer, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, vol. 1, pp. 116–18. Giovanni Antonio Rusconi may have intended a discussion since he illustrated a scene of men painting the exterior of a building, but according to the posthumous caption, the image illustrates only the practice of applying red lead

For example, after arriving in Venice Serlio invented the architectural backdrop for a painting of the Justice of Trajan by Giovanni Cariani and produced designs for ceiling decorations. On the Cariani painting see Schmitter, 'Display', pp. 194-9; for the ceiling designs, see Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, 'Introduction' in Serlio, *On Architecture*, p. xii. His heavily illustrated architectural treatise is another example of how he combined his skills in both art forms, but even before this project Serlio produced engravings of architectural details. See Deborah Howard, 'Sebastiano Serlio's Venetian Copyrights', *Burlington Magazine* 115 (1973), pp. 512-16.

Vasari's life of Peruzzi gives a strong sense of how the Sienese artist combined architecture and painting in various projects. For Peruzzi's influence on Serlio's treatise see Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, 'Introduction' in *Serlio, On Architecture*, pp. xiv-xv.

Serlio, *On Architecture*, p. 378. 'Io non mi estrenderò di molti altri pittori italiani giudiciosi, i quali in tali luoghi non hanno mai adoperato altro colore che chiaro, & secco, per non rompere l’ordine dell’Architetture.' Serlio, *Tutte l’opere*, p. 191v.


See note 1. Serlio may have been right to worry that the architect might not remain in charge. An idea of how façade decorations were actually negotiated is given in rare surviving contracts. When G. B. Meneghini decided to restructure his Paduan house front in 1528, he hired the stonemasons Francesco di Lorenzetto and C. Maria da Castelfranco. The sculptural ornament, on the other hand, was contracted out to Bartolomeo Cavazzza da Sossano, who was in turn told to leave certain parts untouched for the painter: 'Dove andera depento no volio sia bianchezza, perché lo fort el depente.' *Domenico Campagnola*. Quoted in Pier Luigi Fantelli, *Padova e Provvincia. Pintura murale esterna nel Veneto, Bassano: Giunta Regionale del Veneto and Ghedina & Tassotti, 1989, p. 40.

Carlo Ridolfi, *Maxvuglia*, vol. 1, p. 248, also describes how Andrea Schiavone befriended masons because they 'rather than the architects' were often given the responsibility of looking after the painting as well.'


Serlio, *On Architecture*, p. 378. 'Ma se con giudicio saldo si vorrà ornar co il pennelli una facciata; si potrà finger di marmo, o d’altra pietra; scolpendo in esso ciò si vorrà; di bronzo ancora in alcuni nicchi si potrà fingere delle figure di tutto rilievo, & ancora qualche historietta finta pur di bronzo, perché così facendo mantenerà l’opera soda, & degna di lode appresso di tutti quelli, che conoscono il vero dal fabbro.' Serlio, *Tutte l’opere*, p. 191v.

See note 1.

Vasari, *On Technique*, pp. 83-4. 'E così per tutte le facce ... faevano una maledizione di tabernacoli l’un sopra l’altro, con tante piramidi e punte e foglie, che, non ch’elie possano stare, pare impossibile ch’elle si possino reggere, et hanno più il modo da parer fatte di carta che di pietre o di marmi ... lddio scampi ogni pensiero et ordine di lavori, che, per essere egli talmente difficili alla bellezza delle fabrice nostre, meritano che non se ne favelli piu che questo.' Vasari, *Vite*, text vol. 1, p. 67.

Serlio, *On Architecture*, p. 378, italics mine. 'Et se pur il padrone dell’opera, o il pittore si vorranno compierci delle vueglianza in i colori, per non rompere, o guastar l’opera, come di sopra dissi: si potranno finger alcuni panni attaccati al muro, come cosa mobile: & in quelli dipingere ciò che piace; perche così facendo, non romperà l’ordine; & fingerà il vero, servindo il decoro.' Serlio, *Tutte l’opere*, p. 191v.

For a discussion of how Renaissance art theorists associated colour with the lower classes,

60. Armenini refers to Serlio's treatise at least three times, True Precepts, pp. 206, 278, 286.

61. Ibid., p. 272. '[N]e credo che per alcun tempo, mentre duri la grandezza de' Romani, se ne vedesse mai di rilevo con tanto artificio ... Et è certo che se queste spoglie fossero state da vero, si come erano finite, non penso che mai riuo si fosse curato di veder meglio.' Armenini, Veri precetti, p. 231.

62. Armenini, True Precepts, p. 272. 'Si son veduti poi, dopo la morte di costoro, ingoffirsi gli ingegni in tal modo, che di questo miracol fane si è quasi perduto affatto le vie. Concioniacciaché si è ripreso di nuovo in quelle a furvi istorie con figure e altr' matte, tutte colorite nel modo che si usa a far nelle sale e dentro i palagi de' signori, il che viun biasimato da chi intende, come di cose improprie e volgari.' Armenini, Veri precetti, p. 231.


64. Armenini, True Precepts, p. 272. '[M]a perché si sa al fine quanto si tiri dietro l'uso delle cose, non ci par di dover restore di non darvene qualche segnalati essempi attesoche mai non ci sono mancati di servire a i patroni gli avari di quelli, purchè a essi vegano danari.' Armenini, Veri precetti, p. 231.

65. Armenini, True Precepts, p. 273. 'Or ci sono poi molt'altre luoghi scoperti che, a questo proposito, si potria adurre esempi d' essi, i quals, per esser noi presto a poco, li lasciaremo da parte, insieme con tutte quelle cose che sono comune a' do[zz]inai, essendo quelle troppo separate da noi e troppo abiette.' Armenini, Veri precetti, p. 232.

66. Armenini, True Precepts, p. 241. '[D]ove essi asperano poi d'avere onore e commodi, gli riescono con scommodit, pentimento e biasimo infinito; et il peggio è che, per colmarle poi affatto, essi medesimi si vogliono a farle dipingere con gl'imbrattamenti de' dozzinali, con pregarli che si stendano nelle facciate, et il lasciaremoci da parte, e sopratutto osservando il decoro, e questo se n'anderebbe poco, e poco di più, de' portatori dello schif, come se stata non fosse differenza dal dipingere all'imbiancare le case: qual uso di dipingere si è dimeso in Venezia, paurando che le opere a fresco andassero a male per le acque marine con le quali s'incorpora la calce, & hano in quella vuoca gli architetti introdotto lo incostar di marmi le case a guisa di Fortezze.' Ridolfi, Nervatives, vol. 1, p. 248.

67. 'Ed era a tale segno ridotta l'arte, che dar solevasi al pittole la solita mercede, o poco piu, de' portatori dello schif, come se stata non fosse differenza dal dipingere all'imbiancare le case: qual uso di dipingere si è dimeso in Venezia, paurando che le opere a fresco andassero a male per le acque marine con le quali s'incorpora la calce, & hano in quella vuoca gli architetti introdotto lo incostar di marmi le case a guisa di Fortezze.' Ridolfi, Nervatives, vol. 1, p. 248.

68. He will admit only painting in black and white, preferably without figures unless they are at least nine or ten feet tall. Sir Henry Wotton, The Elements of Architecture (1624), Charlottesville: Folger Shakespeare Library and University Press of Virginia, 1968, p. 96. I would like to thank Christy Anderson for drawing my attention to this passage.

70. Vitruvius, The Ten Books on Architecture, translated by Morris Hicky Morgan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914, pp. 16 and 181–2. Alberti, Art of Building, p. 120, sought to best out Vitruvius's ideas by specifying how to distinguish houses of princes from those of private citizens. Illustrated treatises like Filarete's and Francesco di Giorgio Martini's went on to provide plans (if not façades) of houses for different social classes. In the last great Italian Renaissance architectural treatise, Vincenzo Scamozzi gives considerable detail about the proper type and decoration, and location of houses for various classes of men. L'idea della architettura universale (1615), Bologna: Arnoldo Forni, 1982, esp. chapter 9, pp. 245–56.

71. Serlio, On Architecture, p. 254. 'Secondo lo stato, & le professioni loro', Serlio, Tutte l'opere, p. 128c. Serlio's influential theories about how architectural forms could express character and social status were very likely developed in competition with painted façades which allowed patrons such rhetorical latitude in expressing their histories, virtues, and political connections. In his treatise, Serlio 'translates' the kind of messages previously expressed figuratively on painted

Armenini, True Precepts, pp. 241-2, italics mine. ‘[A]nzi son tali che, ne’ palagi difettivi, dove il rimedio per accendarli e per ridurli non vale, essi vi provvedono col mezzo delle pitture e delle prospettive; le quali conducono con tanto giudizio che, con l’ingannar l’occhio a’ riguardanti, ricoprono gli errori predetti; e ciò come sia grande, si è veduto in cose che sono in sé meschine e vili, trovarsi comparir perciò magnifiche, vaghe et onorevoli.’ Armenini, Veri precetti, p. 200.


In one of the only critiques of Tafuri’s argument, Margaret Plant has noted Tafuri’s tendency to see Rome as centre and Venice as periphery. ‘View from Venice: the Renaissance is the name of the father’, Spunti e ricerche 4-5 (1988-9), pp. 23-9.